

Isaiah 38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 38. In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, came to him and said to him, Thus says the Lord, Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover.

Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, and said, Please, O Lord, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah, Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father, I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and will defend this city. This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do this thing that he has promised. Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz, turn back ten steps. So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined. A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, after he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness. I said, In the middle of my days I must depart.

I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years. I said, I shall not see the Lord, the Lord in the land of the living. I shall look on man no more among the inhabitants of the world.

My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me like a shepherd's tent. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life. He cuts me off from the loom. From day to night you bring me to an end. I calmed myself until morning. Like a lion he breaks all my bones. From day to night you bring me to an end.

[1 : 4 7] Like a swallow or a crane I chirp. I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed. Be my pledge of safety. What shall I say? For he has spoken to me, and he himself has done it. I walk slowly all my years because of the bitterness of my soul.

O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. O restore me to health and make me live. Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness. But in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction. For you have cast all my sins behind your back.

For Sheol does not thank you. Death does not praise you. Those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living he thanks you. As I do this day, the Father makes known to the children your faithfulness. The Lord will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives at the house of the Lord. Now Isaiah had said, Let them take a cake of figs and apply it to the boil, that he may recover. Hezekiah also had said, What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the Lord? As in the case of the preceding two chapters concerning the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, much of the material of Isaiah chapters 38 and 39 is also found in 2 Kings, these two chapters having extensive overlap with the material of 2 Kings chapter 20.

If we believe, as most commentators do, that chapters 36 and 37 relate to the events of 701 BC, rather than to an earlier attack upon Jerusalem, it would seem that both in 2 Kings and in Isaiah, the narrative material is not in chronological order. This is indicated by the text itself, which promises the deliverance of the city and Hezekiah from the king of Assyria, strongly implying that this is prior to 701 BC, at a time when the Assyrian threat was imminent.

The visit of the envoys of Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon, also almost certainly did not occur after the events of 701 BC. Merodach-Baladan had taken the throne of Babylon in 722 BC and had secured Babylon's independence from Assyria until removed in 710 BC. In 703 BC, he returned from Elam, incited a rebellion against Assyria in Babylonia again, but was removed within the year. Although he had managed to flee to Elam again, it is highly unlikely that he was sending envoys to Hezekiah in Jerusalem any time after 701 BC. As chapter 39 seems to be connected to chapter 38, as the illness of Hezekiah seems to have occasioned the sending of the envoys, we also have to consider the fact that Hezekiah was told that he would have 15 more years to live. This clearly presents a constraint for our dating, although as there are wildly varying dates given as the most likely year of Hezekiah's death, it might not help us as much as we might expect it to. A further detail is the introductory phrase, in those days, in this chapter, which, taken with the allusion to the imminence of the threat of the Assyrians to Jerusalem, weighs in favour of a date nearer to 701 BC.

[5 : 00] On balance, my inclination is to date Hezekiah's illness to around 704 to 703 BC. We are still left with the question of why the chronology of the text is disrupted at this point, in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles and Isaiah. In the case of the book of Isaiah, it is helpful to consider the structure of the book more generally. The accounts of chapters 36 to 39 have several parallels to the earlier accounts concerning Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, in chapters 7 and following. The two kings face similar crises, the first in the Syro-Ephraimite crisis of the 730s and the second in the Assyrian crisis of 701 BC, but their responses to those crises are contrasted. In both cases, they are given signs by the Lord. In Ahaz's case, the signs are those of new birth. In Hezekiah's case, the sign represents the turning back of time and his deliverance from illness and death. In both of these cases, the signs to the kings also symbolise the fate of their kingdom. In Isaiah, the events of chapter 39 also anticipate the latter part of the book, which focuses upon Babylon, making it a very natural seam at that point in the text. The city is under threat, but the king is also seriously ill at the point of death. As if the severity of his illness were not enough, the Lord sends Isaiah to Hezekiah to confirm the fact of his forthcoming death. He will not recover, and his nation is on the brink of being overrun by the Assyrians. The king is expecting death at one of the most critical times in the nation's history. He would have to leave the reins of the nation in the hands of his son

Manasseh, a man who proved wicked for much of his life, although some commentators question whether he yet had an heir. The symbolic relationship between the physical body of the king and the body politic has been much explored by writers and poets and theorised by theologians and political thinkers, perhaps most notably in the work of Ernst Kantorowicz, who wrote on the subject in *The King's Two Bodies*.

The illness of King Hezekiah is a symbol of the ailing of the kingdom and its nearness to death. Can the kingdom be delivered from the exile that seemingly awaits it? Hezekiah's response to the Lord's announcement is to turn his face to the wall and to seek the Lord's reprieve. He calls upon the Lord to consider the way that he has walked before him faithfully. Like his forefather David, he has walked before the Lord with a whole heart, seeking to do what is good in the sight of the Lord. After the idolatry of the reign of Ahaz, he has sought to re-establish true worship in the land and to root out all the idolatry and false worship that had become entrenched there.

As the account of Second Kings informs us, even before Isaiah had left the courts of the palace, the word of the Lord came to him, sending him back to Hezekiah with the message that his prayer had been heard. The Lord addresses Hezekiah as the God of David his father. He will be healed and restored. Second Kings adds the detail that on the third day he will be raised up to go into the house of the Lord. This won't merely be a reprieve of short duration. The Lord will add 15 years to his life.

As the king symbolizes the nation, this deliverance is not just for Hezekiah as a private individual, is also for him as the representative of the nation and the city. The city will also be delivered, delivered from the hand of the king of Assyria. God's commitment to the city is for the sake of David his servant and also for his own namesake. He has placed his name in Zion's temple and he is jealous for its holiness. Second Kings chapter 20 verses 8 to 11 give a longer account of the sign given to Hezekiah, making clear that the sign was one concerning which Hezekiah was given a choice.

[8 : 48] And Hezekiah said to Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord on the third day? And Isaiah said, This shall be the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do the thing that he has promised. Shall the shadow go forward ten steps, or go back ten steps? And Hezekiah answered, It is an easy thing for the shadow to lengthen ten steps.

Rather let the shadow go back ten steps. And Isaiah the prophet called to the Lord, and he brought the shadow back ten steps, by which it had gone down on the steps of Ahaz.

King Ahaz had rejected a sign when it was offered to him back in chapter 7, in a false show of piety. His son Hezekiah gladly receives his. The nature of the steps in question are disputed. It is not said that the steps represent ours, or that they are part of a sundial. The steps may have been steps that led up to the altar, or in some part of the palace. Their connection with Ahaz might also recall Hezekiah's father, heightening the comparisons and contrasts that are being drawn here.

As Peter Lighthouse observes, the words for stairs here are connected with ascent, and there are themes of ascent and descent throughout this chapter, descent to Sheol, and then lifting up from illness. For this reason, among others, the sign would seem to be a fitting one.

Within both the sign and the healing of Hezekiah, we can discern a deeper message. People's times, even those of kings and nations, are in the hands of the Lord. He can bring a person or a nation back from the brink of death, and no one can stay his hand. When facing the prospect of imminent national or personal death, he is the one to turn to, rather than resorting to lesser powers.

[10 : 31] The writing of Hezekiah in response to his healing, recorded for us in verses 9-20, is not found in either 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles. Indeed, 2 Chronicles presents Hezekiah in a rather less flattering light, in chapter 32 verses 24-26.

In those days Hezekiah became sick, and was at the point of death. And he prayed to the Lord, and he answered him, and gave him a sign. But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him, and Judah and Jerusalem. But Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah's writing includes elements of lament and also of thanksgiving. He bemoans the fact that he is being cut off in the middle of his life. The land of the living is the place where the praise of the Lord and all of the things that really matter are found, and yet he is going to be consigned to Sheol, exiled from the special presence of the Lord, and no longer having communion with other human beings. Human life is fragile and transient. Hezekiah compares his existence to a shepherd's tent that can be pulled up, or like a piece of fabric that's removed by a weaver from the loom when it's finished. It seems that the Lord himself is against Hezekiah, and yet it is to the Lord that he calls out in his despair. Recognizing the Lord's hand in his distress, and the way that the Lord is speaking to him through his suffering, is the means by which Hezekiah is able to turn the corner. Life and health is ultimately found through the Lord's speech to people. Men live by the words that proceed from the mouth of the Lord. As the Lord deals with Hezekiah through his illness and suffering, he restores Hezekiah to a greater health than he had previously. Through the word of his prophet Isaiah, the Lord had charged

Hezekiah to set his house in order, to prepare himself for death, and as Hezekiah did that, the Lord healed him and restored him. In particular, his sins were forgiven. His physical restoration came with a spiritual one too. Hezekiah began this writing by speaking about the way that the dead are cut off from the praise of the Lord, and he ends by returning to the same theme. Having been delivered from death, he will devote himself to the praise of the Lord, and the passing on of the goodness of the Lord to his children after him. As the redeemed king, he is going to lead the people in the assembly at the temple in praise of the Lord. The chapter concludes with a couple of details that refer back to the earlier narrative of the sign and Hezekiah's healing. Here we discover that Hezekiah had a boil, perhaps connected with the plague or something like that. The application of figs was a known form of treatment of certain ailments, and we need not presume that it is some strange prophetic sign in itself. We should also consider that having such a skin condition might also have barred him from the worship of the Lord, even if he was healthy enough to attend otherwise. Returning to the sign here has the effect of bracketing the entire account with the action of the Lord. It also recalls the structure of the preceding chapter. A question to consider, what should we make of the very pessimistic view of the afterlife in Hezekiah's writing, as in many other parts of the Old Testament, such as Job or the Psalms?